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Testimony of Oriana Farnham, Maine Equal Justice, in support of LD 943, An Act to Require the ASPIRE-TANF Program to Be Administered by State Employees

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Good afternoon. I'm Oriana Farnham, an attorney at Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit civil legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. I provide legal help to people across Maine so they can secure public benefits that they're eligible for and that their families rely on to make ends meet. I'm here today to testify in support of LD 943.

Maine's TANF program has the vision and potential to help low-income parents reach their goals and find good jobs that can support their families. I love working with my TANF clients. I'm not a parent myself, but all of my TANF clients are. I love talking to them about the opportunities they want to give their kids and their personal goals ranging from becoming HVAC technicians, to getting nursing degrees, to running for office like all of you. Maine has designed the ASPIRE program to provide education, training, and employment services to parents to gain skills and break down the many financial barriers to work.

However, Fedcap has never lived up to Maine's vision for the TANF-ASPIRE program and instead has failed families across Maine. Since 2016, Maine Equal Justice has provided legal help to at least 233 families struggling with Fedcap—and those are just the ones who have found their way to MEJ. I have personally handled 70 of those cases. I have spent hundreds of hours talking to ASPIRE participants about their problems with Fedcap and troubleshooting those problems with staff from the Department of Health and Human Services tasked with overseeing Fedcap. Unfortunately, over the three and a half years I've been doing this work, I have not seen significant improvement in Fedcap's provision of ASPIRE services.

The most common and pressing issue I see from talking to my clients is that Fedcap does not adequately train its staff on ASPIRE program rules, and the Department's persistent efforts to monitor, train, and support Fedcap staff over many years have not

significantly improved this problem. This results in many participants not receiving ASPIRE services they're eligible for that could lead to better jobs, simply because Fedcap doesn't equip its staff to help parents access those services.

I want to tell you a client story to illustrate how this harms ASPIRE participants and Maine's efforts to grow its skilled workforce.

This winter, I helped a client who needed repairs on her car so she could get to nursing classes. ASPIRE can provide up to \$1,000 per year in car repairs to break down transportation as a barrier to employment. My client asked Fedcap for help with car repairs in August 2024. Fedcap asked her for an estimate and other documents, which she provided. For two months, she asked Fedcap repeatedly when she could schedule the appointment for the car repairs. In November, they said they had all the documents they needed, and they would let her know soon. I got involved in the case in December and learned from the Department that Fedcap had not submitted the support service request to the Department, had not uploaded any of the documents provided by my client into their computer system, and upon review, the estimate my client provided months ago didn't meet the Department's standards because it wasn't itemized. This is something Fedcap could have helped my client correct months before. My client had to get another estimate, and then schedule the appointment for repairs out several weeks. It wasn't until February that my client's car was repaired. She considered dropping out of school that spring because she couldn't get to her classes. Luckily, with MEJ's help, she enrolled in online classes for the spring and used her car after February to get to campus for tutoring and other events.

This case is typical of the Fedcap's inefficient and ineffective role between ASPIRE participants and the Department. Fedcap simply has not trained or supported its staff to properly administer ASPIRE, despite having nine years of experience in Maine.

As a result, parents across Maine miss out on life-changing benefits. If my client hadn't contacted MEJ, she would not have received the financial help she was eligible for and may have dropped out of school. I've had other clients who have done just that when Fedcap has failed them. This is someone whose dream is to become a nurse, filling a critical gap in Maine's healthcare workforce. She will get her nursing degree in spite of, not with the support of, Fedcap.

Time is precious for parents with young children. TANF has harsh time limits on the amount of assistance a parent can get in their lifetime. My clients cannot afford to wait for Fedcap to improve its services, which it has proven over the past nine years that it is unable to do. Parents need support now so they can earn money to keep food on the table, keep the lights on, and provide opportunities for their children to get ahead.

Maine can do better for low-income families. LD 943 provides a path forward. The Department is best equipped to administer the ASPIRE program as it did for decades before the State experimented with contracting to Fedcap. Please vote "ought to pass" on LD 943.